

BLACK SHIPS & SAMURAI

COMMODORE PERRY AND THE OPENING OF JAPAN (1853-1854)

BY JOHN W. DOWER

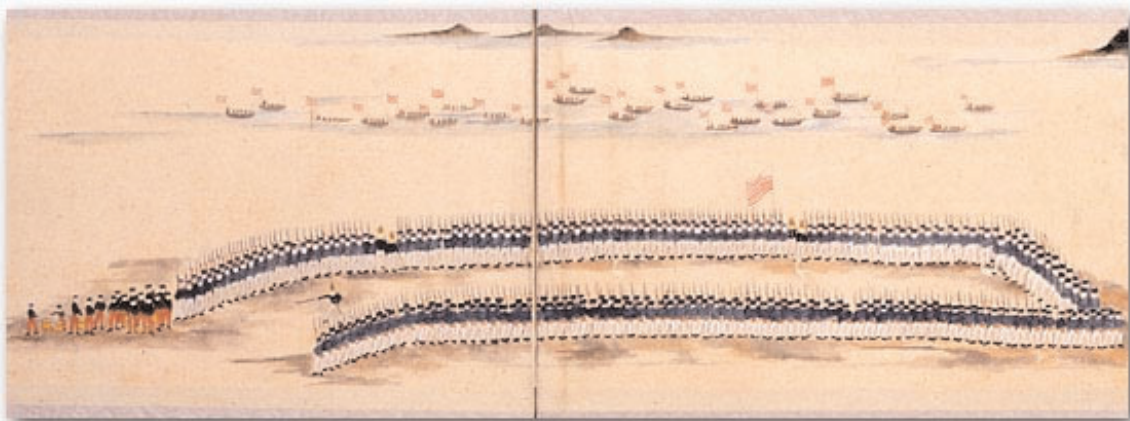
CHAPTER FIVE: FACING "WEST"

The Japanese visualization of these first encounters presents a different world. This is true not only of artwork churned out at the time, but also of evocations of the Perry mission that artists produced in later years. It mattered greatly, of course, that whereas the Americans were observing the Japanese in their native milieu, the Japanese were confronting intruders far from home.

For the Japanese, that is, the foreigners who suddenly materialized in their waters and descended upon their soil had no context, no tactile background. They existed detached from any broader physical and cultural environment. Whereas Heine and his colleagues could attempt to present "Japan" to their audience, the Japanese had only a small number of "Americans" and their artifacts upon which to focus.

There was, moreover, no counterpart on the Japanese side to the official artists employed by Perry—and thus no Japanese attempt to create a sustained visual (or written) narrative of these momentous interactions. What we have instead are representations by a variety of artists, most of whose names are unknown. Their artistic conventions differed from those of the Westerners. Their works were reproduced and disseminated not as lithographs and engravings or fine-line woodcuts, but largely as brightly colored woodblock prints as well as black-and-white broadsheets (*kawaraban*).

They also painted in formats such as unfolding "horizontal scrolls" (*emaki*) that had no counterpart in the West. It was common for such scrolls to be 20 or 30 feet long, and in some cases they inspired variant copies. Many of these artists drew no boundary between direct observation and flights of imagination. On occasion, tension permeated their images—and no wonder. Their insular way of life, after all, had been violated and would never be the same. Although one might (and some did) pretend otherwise, it was obvious where the preponderance of power lay.



Perry's troops landing in Yokohama, 1854

Shiryo Hensanjo, University of Tokyo

Some of these artistic responses reflected bravado and an attempt to rally domestic support against the foreign threat. In anticipation of Perry's arrival, the Shogun's government had mobilized its own samurai forces and ordered *daimyo* (local lords) throughout the land to send troops to defend the capital. Thousands of armed warriors manned the shoreline when Perry landed on his two visits. In the renderings of the Narrative, these soldiers and officials appear calm and unruffled, even when mounted on horseback or challenging the American crew that was surveying Edo Bay. And while tension inevitably accompanied these encounters, discipline and order did prevail. No violent incidents occurred, and Japanese renderings of the first meetings of the two sides also convey a sense of formality.

There were even unanticipated occasions where each side had the opportunity to observe and record a common solemn moment on the part of the other—a funeral, in this instance—and did so with differing styles, to be sure, but also with a shared respectfulness. Thus a lithograph in the Narrative depicting a Buddhist funeral procession in Shimoda has an interesting counterpart in a Japanese sketch of the American funeral procession for marine private Robert Williams, who died of illness during Perry's second visit. After brief and courteous negotiation, the Japanese not only agreed to allow the deceased to be buried on Japanese soil, but also had Buddhist priests participate in the funeral service. The respect the Americans showed to the dead clearly helped weaken the familiar stereotypes of "southern barbarians" and "foreign devils." At the same time, the American tolerance of Buddhist participation in the rites of interment offers a striking contrast to more invidious popular evocations of the Japanese as "heathen."



Japanese funeral in Shimoda, from the official Narrative



Funeral procession of Private Williams, by Tohohata (Osuke) 1854

Shiryō Hensanjo, University of Tokyo



Inscription from Robert Williams's gravestone in the 1854 "Black Ship Scroll"

Honolulu Academy of Art

So great was the impression left by the death of Williams that the long "Black Ship Scroll" painted in Shimoda in 1854 included a drawing of the inscription on his tombstone.

In all, four Americans with the Perry mission died and were buried in Japan. Private Williams, originally buried in Yokohama, was reinterred in Shimoda. One of Heine's most evocative illustrations depicts Americans and Japanese, including a Buddhist priest, in a hillside cemetery in Shimoda, the American fleet visible at anchor in the harbor.



Heine's 1854 rendering of the harbor at Shimoda "from the American Grave Yard" (detail), from the official Narrative

By rare good fortune, we have a daguerreotype of the four American graves, most likely taken the following year. Evocative in its own way, the photograph also highlights the romanticism of Heine's vision of these historic encounters.

Four American gravestones in the cemetery of Gyokusenji temple in Shimoda. Daguerreotype attributed to Edward Kern, ca. 1855

George Eastman House



In ways absent from the American graphics, however, Japanese artists also succeeded in conveying a tense willingness to fight if need be on the part of the Japanese defenders. Colored as well as black-and-white prints depicted samurai crouched in readiness for imminent battle.



Samurai guards at Edo Bay, detail from a kawaraban broadsheet, 1854

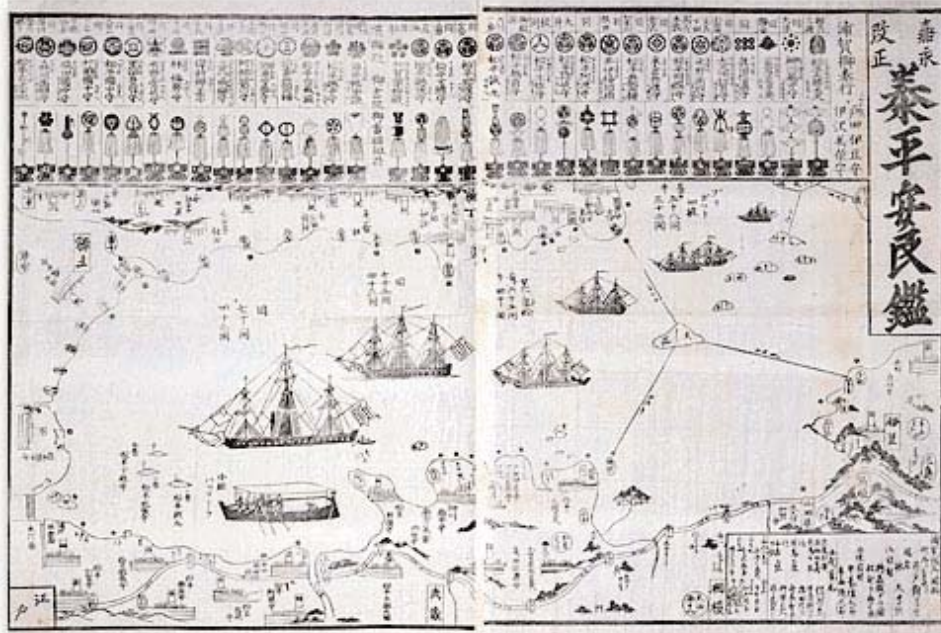
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*Detail from a montage titled
"Pictorial Depiction of American
People and Steamship"
ca. 1854*

Ryosenji Treasure Museum



In some cases, the massive mobilization of samurai was conveyed in a traditional "heraldic" manner. Here, depiction of the foreign fleet sitting offshore was paired with a row of tiny drawings of the distinctive crests, decorated staffs, and other insignia that identified different *daimyo* and their retainers.



Japanese deployment against U.S. black ships at Edo Bay, 1854 kawaraban

Ryosenji Treasure Museum

Even decades later, after Japan's new leaders had dismantled the feudal system and embarked on a policy of ardent "Westernization," the image of heroic warriors bristling to take on Perry's imperialist intruders had an avid audience. The most flamboyant woodblock print of the imagined samurai defenders in Edo Bay, for example, dates from 1889 and conveys a sense of both peril and gritty determination that could still rouse the fervor of new nationalists in a new nation.



Samurai from various fiefs mobilize to defend the homeland against Perry's intrusion, 1889 woodblock print by Toshu Shogetsu

Shiryō Hensanjo, University of Tokyo

The most audaciously fictional rendering of Perry and the Japanese was circulated as a *kawaraban* broadsheet around 1854. This depicts the commodore prostrating himself before an official in full samurai armor seated on the traditional camp stool of a fighting general.



Perry prostrating himself before a samurai official, kawaraban (detail) ca. 1854

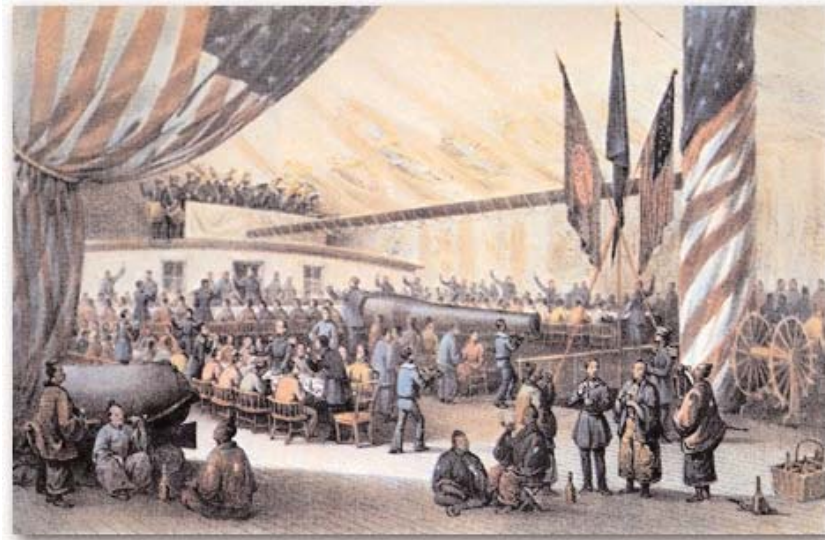
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Widely known for his haughty demeanor even before the Japan expedition, Perry took extraordinary care never to display the slightest sign of subordination or obsequiousness in his dealings with Japanese officials. Had he seen this little pearl of propaganda, it surely would have made his hair curl.

More than a few Japanese graphics had a cartoon quality, and some were deliberately humorous—again, something never seen in the sober American illustrations. One of the liveliest episodes that took place during the second visit, for example, was a banquet on the *Powhatan*.

As it happens, we know from various sources that this evolved into less than formal behavior. In an entertaining letter to his wife, one of Perry's officers (Lieutenant George Henry Preble) recounted that, "in accordance with the old adage that if they eat hearty they give us a good name," he and his comrades took care to keep the plates and glasses of their guests full. "Doing my duty therefore, in obedience to orders," he continued, "I plied the Japanese in my neighborhood well, and when clean work had been made of champagne, Madeira, cherry cordial, punch and whisky I resorted to the castors and gave them a mixture of catsup and vinegar which they seemed to relish with equal gusto." Both sides interspersed their libations with friendly toasts.

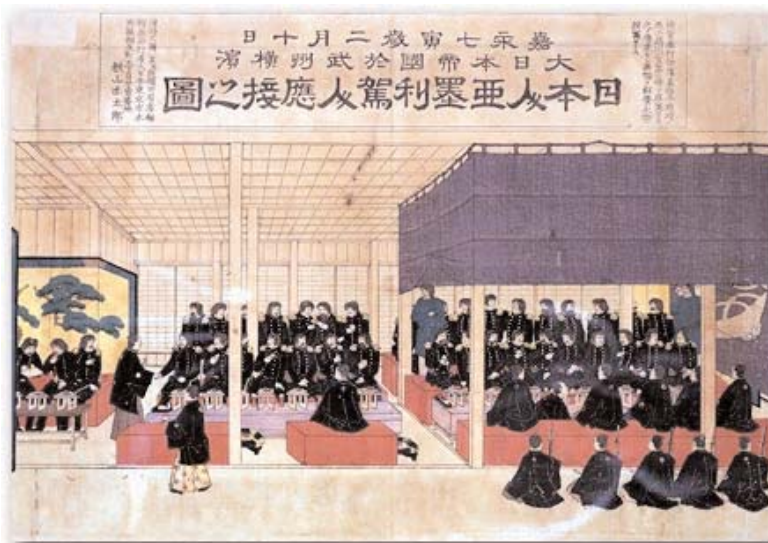
*Banquet on board
the Powhatan*



The band played, and American officers danced with Japanese officials in formal robes. One of the commissioners was so carried away by the end of the evening that he threw his arms around Perry's neck, embraced him rather sloppily, crushed his epaulettes, and (in a subsequently often-quoted phrase) burred "Nippon and America, all the same heart." As Preble recounted the story, when asked how he could tolerate such behavior, the commodore replied, "Oh, if he will only sign the Treaty he may kiss me." Gunboat diplomacy was a demanding business.

One could never imagine any of this from Heine's entirely decorous rendering of the event in the official Narrative, and unfortunately no irreverent Japanese artists were present to record the scene.

When the Japanese reciprocated with a banquet of their own, on the other hand, we have not only a somber rendering of this (sketched at the time but published as a woodblock print many years later), but also an anonymous and quite disorderly print that suggests the Westerners, although not required to sit Japanese style on the floor, clearly had a difficult time swallowing the native cuisine.



*Japanese reception for
the Americans, late-
19th-century wood-
block print from a
sketch done at the time*

Ryosenji Treasure Museum



“Entertainment Held in the Reception Hall at Yokohama” (detail), ca. 1854

Peabody Essex Museum

Frequently, Japanese artists resorted to montage to convey a sense of the multifaceted nature of the Perry encounter. The landing at Yokohama in March 1854, for example, inspired a number of prints combining views of the black ships at anchor with drawings of the commodore and his crew marching in parade.

One elaborate montage, titled “Pictorial Depiction of American People and Steamship,” featured a map of the world in the center (with Japan in the center of the map), surrounded by depictions of the curtained-off Japanese shore defenses, a gunboat belching smoke, Perry and his attendants in rather untidy parade (the Americans had better posture when their own artists drew them), the samurai in full armor we already have seen, and crewmen from the black ships gaping at the sight of two giant sumo wrestlers.



“Pictorial Depiction of American People and Steamship” ca. 1854

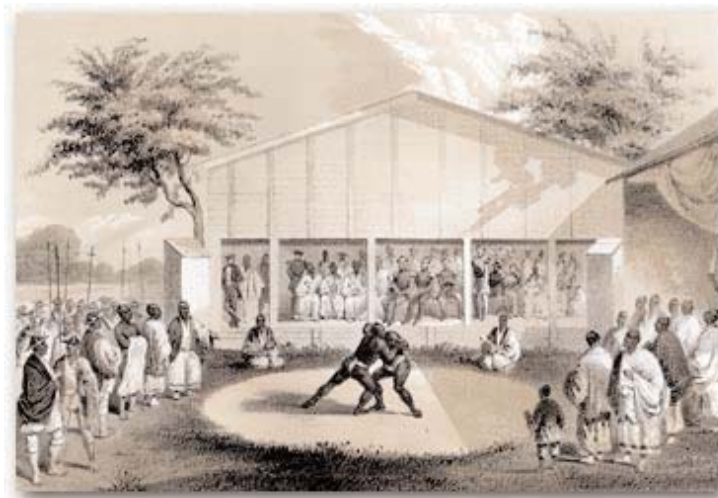
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The most spectacular assemblage of graphics, completed at a later date, took the form of a dramatic eight-panel standing screen, now known as the "Assembled Pictures of Commodore Perry's Visit." On this were affixed depictions of the black ships, Perry and other members of his mission (including ordinary crew), troops in formation, entertainments, artifacts the Americans brought with them, and the official gifts they proffered (including a telegraph apparatus and a small model train).



"Assembled Pictures of Commodore Perry's Visit"
eight-panel folding screen

Shiryo Hensanjo, University of Tokyo



Sumo, as it turned out, attracted artists on both sides. The Narrative featured a lithograph (by W. T. Peters) of an outdoor sumo match observed by a crowd of Japanese and Americans including Perry himself, as well as a pencil drawing of two sumo champions by the always respectful Heine.

The sumo wrestlers did not impress everyone favorably, however. The Narrative described them as “over-fed monsters” and found the wrestling matches themselves “disgusting”—a mere “show of brute animal force.” In his personal journal, Perry dismissed the bouts as a “farce” and referred to the eventual winner as “the reputed bully of the capital, who seemed to labor like a Chinese junk in chow-chow water.” The sight of some twenty-five or thirty of these brawny men grouped together struck him as “giving a better idea of an equal number of stall-fed bulls than human beings.”



Sumo detail from 1854 montage

Ryosenji Treasure Museum

By contrast, in Japanese eyes these same figures became an almost irresistible vehicle through which to intimate Japan’s formidable strength, against which the foreigners were puny and powerless. In the “Pictorial Depiction of American People and Steamship” montage, the American spectators appear small, ludicrous, and astonished at the sight of two of these giants grappling with each other.

In the same spirit, the spectacle of these strongmen hefting huge bales of rice the Americans were unable to budge (they weighed over 125 pounds) became another witty way of suggesting that the intruders were no match for Japanese. A scroll of first-hand sketches of the foreigners prepared by a retainer of the *daimyo* of Ogasawara included skillful line drawings of awed marines examining the bulk of a sumo champion.

Even Perry was given the opportunity to feel the muscles of one of these giants. The artists naturally portrayed him as duly impressed, although the official report tells us he was merely expressing surprise “at this wondrous exhibition of animal development.”

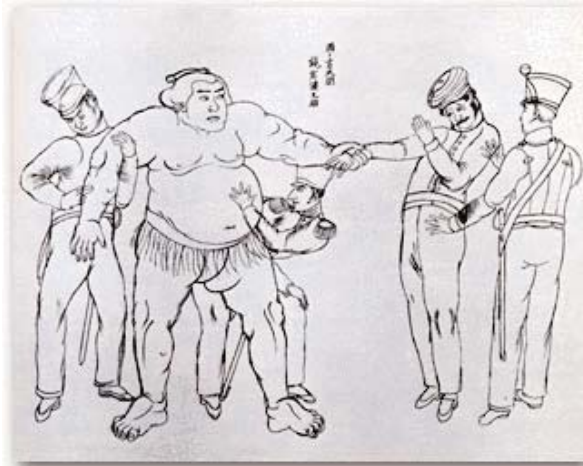


*Sumo wrestlers carry rice bales,
1854 (above, left)*

Collection of DeWolf Perry

*Perry and a Japanese wrestler,
1854 (above, right)*

Collection of DeWolf Perry



*Marines examining a sumo
wrestler, 1854 (left)*

Smithsonian Institution

In the decade following the Perry expedition, the larger-than-life sumo wrestler continued to provide a small vehicle for iconographic bravado. After a new commercial treaty was signed in 1858 and foreigners began to flood into the country, woodblock artists portrayed these native heroes tossing around, not bales of rice, but the hairy barbarians themselves.

*"The Glory of Sumo
Wrestlers at Yokohama,"
1860 and 1861*

Ryosenji Treasure Museum



When it came to promoting human curiosities, however, Perry was not to be outdone. The American counterpart to the sumo wrestler was white men in black-face, as well as flesh-and-blood Negroes.



Minstrel show on the Powhatan

Chrysler Museum of Art
(above)

Shiryo Hensanjo,
University of Tokyo
(right)

“Ethiopian Concert” program from minstrel show on the Powhatan



In Japan (as well as elsewhere on the voyage to and from Japan), Perry's favorite entertainment was an "Ethiopian concert" featuring white men playing the roles of "Colored 'Gemmen' of the North" and "Plantation 'Niggas' of the South," and singing such songs as "Darkies Serenade" and "Oh! Mr. Coon." Although the Narrative dwells on the "delight to the natives" these performances gave, it remained for Japanese artists to preserve them for posterity.

From the moment he first stepped on Japanese soil in 1853 to present the letter from President Fillmore, Perry also sought to impress the Japanese with authentic black men. "On either side of the Commodore," the Narrative tells us, "marched a tall, well-formed negro, who, armed to the teeth, acted as his personal guard. These blacks, selected for the occasion, were two of the best-looking fellows of their color that the squadron could furnish." Here again, it is the Japanese side that has left a graphic impression of these stalwart aides.

In other Japanese renderings, however, blacks who accompanied the mission were less than handsome and well-formed. When Perry and his men visited the two treaty ports designated by the Treaty of Kanagawa, artists in both Shimoda and Hakodate drew unflattering portraits of black crewmen who came ashore. They would never be confused with the stalwart standard bearers who flanked Perry when he presented the president's letter.



Perry, accompanied by a "tall, well-formed negro," delivering President Fillmore's letter, 1853

Chrysler Museum of Art



Crewman "hired from a country of black people," from the watercolor "Black Ship and Crew" ca. 1854 (left)

Ryosenji Treasure Museum

"Black man" from the "Black Ship Scroll" 1854

Honolulu Academy of Art





Two images of Perry and black crew members in Hakodate

Hakodate Kyodo Bunkakai

At the time Perry was engaged in opening Japan to “civilization,” slavery was still widespread in the United States and minstrel shows were an enormously popular form of entertainment. (The Narrative dwells at some length on their appealing combination of “grotesque humor and comic yet sentimental melody.”) The Japanese, whose prior contact with dark-skinned peoples was negligible, responded to these encounters with undisguised curiosity. As filtered through the eyes of popular artists, however, this interest emerges more as bemusement about the human species in general than any clear-cut prejudice toward foreigners, or toward blacks in particular.

This seems, at first glance, an unlikely response from a racially homogeneous society that had lived in isolation for so long. It was, however, a logical response when seen from the perspective of the mass-oriented popular culture of late-feudal Japan. Whereas Heine and his colleagues exemplified restrained “high art” traditions of representation, Japanese artists catering to a popular audience had long engaged in exaggeration and caricature. Their purpose was to entertain, and in the tradition of woodblock prints in particular, every conceivable type of subject, activity, and physical appearance was deemed suitable for representation—whether it be scenery, the “floating world” of actors and courtesans, mayhem and grotesquerie, or outright pornography. This protean fascination with the human comedy carried over to artistic renderings of the various types of foreign individuals who came ashore with the commodore in 1853 and 1854.

It is in this spirit that the bare-chested black sailor in Shimoda was introduced as but one of many characters in a popular scroll that treated virtually all members of the expedition as rather odd but essentially entertaining. The larger scene in which he appears includes two “Chinese” who accompanied the expedition, as well as a white man with a telescope.



Chinese members of the Perry expedition with black crewman and white man with a telescope

"Black Ship Scroll" (detail)

Honolulu Academy of Art



This version of the "Black Ship Scroll" (beginning section shown here) is approximately 30-feet long and is read from right to left.

This "Black Ship Scroll" (which came to exist in several variant copies) also featured witty renderings of crewmen engaged in activities that Perry's artists never dreamed of recording: inebriated sailors dancing, for example, and a seaman surrounded by prostitutes. In a nice representation of foreigners making their representations, the Shimoda scrolls also included such scenes as Heine making sketches, Dr. Morrow collecting and recording his specimens of plants, foreigners surveying the countryside, and three aroused Americans (the tongue of one is protruding) making a daguerreotype of a courtesan to present to the "American king."

Inebriated American crewmen dance, while others do their laundry



An American sailor ingratiating himself with prostitutes in Shimoda (together with a long and amusing account of how he succeeded in doing so)



However exaggerated such renderings may have been, they conveyed a playfulness and vitality fully in keeping with the practices of Japanese popular art—and conspicuously different from the high-minded “realism” of Heine and company. From this perspective, the great cultural encounter was genuinely amusing.



Botanist James Morrow and artist William Heine

Surveying the Shimoda countryside



Eliphalet Brown, Jr. and assistants making a daguerreotype of a courtesan

A bemused Japanese woman watches American sailors attempting to hull rice



An American crewman grimaces after tasting hair oil he mistook for an edible delicacy



A variant version of the "Black Ship Scroll"